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The Christian Teacher in a Secular Society— The Challenge of Becoming, Being, and Living

*The Christian Teacher in a Secular Society - the Challenge of
Becoming, Being, and Living*

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Resumen

¿Qué significa ser un maestro cristiano? Esta es quizás la pregunta más importante hecha por un educador cristiano que trabaja dentro de una sociedad secular. De esta pregunta, sin embargo, se conduce al menos a otras dos preguntas: ¿Cómo se convierte uno en un auténtico educador cristiano? Y, ¿cómo un maestro cristiano debe actuar en un entorno posmoderno secular? Este artículo propone que la clave para convertirse en un educador cristiano se encuentra en la creación de un paradigma bíblico de la vida y el aprendizaje. Este paradigma establece la base bíblica para una perspectiva espiritual omnipresente, el origen divino de la verdad, los valores centrados en Dios, la enseñanza como un llamado divino y vivir una vida llena del Espíritu. El consecuente reto de ser un maestro cristiano incluye la forma en que nos acercamos a nuestras disciplinas, en las que vemos a nuestros estudiantes, y en las que se modela la vida cristiana. Por último, la cuestión de actuar como un educador cristiano implica alcanzar intencionalmente a la persona posmoderna secular con un propósito de salvación. Esto implica la creación de una comunidad, reconociendo el contexto, validando las emociones, respetando la diversidad, participando en el diálogo y la construcción de puentes de fe.

Palabras clave: Docente cristiano; educación cristiana; educación superior; sociedad secular

Abstract

What does it mean to be a Christian teacher? This is perhaps the foundational question for a Christian educator who operates within a secular society. This query, however, leads to at least two further questions: How does one become an authentic Christian educator? And, as a Christian teacher, how should one act in a secular postmodern milieu? This presentation proposes that the key to becoming a Christian educator is found in forging a biblical paradigm for life and learning. This paradigm establishes the biblical basis for a pervasive spiritual perspective, the divine origin of truth, God-centered values, teaching as a divine calling, and living a Spirit-filled life. The consequent challenge of being a Christian teacher includes the manner in which we approach our disciplines, in which we view our students, and in which we model the Christian life. Finally, the matter of acting as a Christian educator involves intentionally reaching out to the secular postmodern person with salvation purpose. This involves creating community, recognizing context, validating emotion, respecting diversity, engaging in dialogue, and building faith bridges.

Keywords: Christian teacher; christian education; higher education; secular Society

Introduction

How does a Christian teacher function faithfully and effectively in a secular society? While not a simple matter to address or much less resolve, this issue is one that has become increasingly relevant, given contemporary culture. In this article, we will highlight several considerations that may serve as points of departure and perhaps contribute toward further conversations. First, a couple of core concepts.

A Christian is a disciple of Jesus Christ (Acts 11:26), one who evidences the spirit and the qualities of Jesus. A true disciple is both a believer and a follower. It is a matter of mind and of life, of thinking christianly (John 8:31; 1 Corinthians 2:12-16; Philippians 2:5; Romans 12:2) and of living like Christ (John 15:8; Galatians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6). The challenge is that we find ourselves in an increasingly secular world, a society in which individuals operate without a religious basis, endeavoring to live “without God in the world.”¹

Thus the question, how should a Christian teacher operate in this secular milieu? How should one act? How should one live? At an even more foundational level, given the pervasiveness of the secular worldview, how does one become a genuine Christian educator? And how does one maintain and evidence that distinctive character, while interacting with secular postmodern persons with relevance and with redemptive purpose?

The Challenge of Becoming

It is altogether too easy to teach from a secular worldview—without reference to God or His plan for life and learning. Consequently, to become authentic Christian educators, we must first forge a biblical paradigm, a Christian view of education and of life that includes a least five key elements. This paradigm is a subset of the Christian worldview, with a special focus on the educational process and the role of educators. For further study, the following works are a sample of the resources available that address the Christian worldview, including a number of seminal works (Beckwith et al, 2004; Cosgrove, 2006; Cotham, 2008; Dockery and Thornbury, 2002; Fowler, 1988; Goheen and Bartholomew, 2008; MacCullough, 2013; McArthur, 2009; McBride, 1996; Moreland and Craig, 2003; Nash, 1992; Noebel and Edwards, 2002; Palmer, 1998; Rasi, 2000; Ryken, 2006; Samples, 2007; Sire, 2009; Stephani, 2003; Walsh, 1984).

¹Ephesians 2:12. Unless otherwise indicated, all passages quoted from the Holy Bible are from the New International Version, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by the International Bible Society.

1. A pervasive spiritual perspective. Paul writes, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). God’s glory is His character (Exodus 33:18-22; 34:5-6). To do something then for God’s glory is to reveal His attributes. The emphasis, however, is that in *whatever* we do, in whatever aspect of the educational process we engage, we are to reveal an accurate and attractive picture of God. Paul further explains, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.”² To do something “in the name of” Jesus means to say what He would say, to do what He would do. It implies that we seek to teach our subjects as He would teach them and to interact with our students, as He would relate.

Consequently, in the biblical view, the spiritual perspective is all-encompassing. There are no secular disciplines nor secular subjects. Setting up a spiritual/secular dualism would, in fact, create a false dichotomy. Rather, all of life and learning is to be seen in terms of its relationship to God. As Proverbs 3:6 affirms, “In all your ways *acknowledge Him*.”³

2. The divine origin of truth. God is the Source of all knowledge and truth. Scripture states, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father” (James 1:17, NKJV). The book of Proverbs further adds, “For the LORD gives wisdom. From his mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Proverbs 2:6). In essence, God is the Source not only of knowledge, but He also provides the ability to comprehend meaning and to correctly apply this understanding, which is the essence of wisdom. Finally, John is specific when he writes, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Consequently, truth begins with God, not with man. Further, if God is the Source of truth, all truth must therefore be God’s truth, regardless of where it is found. As educators, we must recognize and affirm that connection, especially to our students.

3. God-centered values. Faced with a society that was losing its spiritual footing, the prophet Ezekiel urged, “Teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezekiel 44:23). In the New Testament, Paul identifies

²Colossians 3:17. Also 2 Corinthians 10:5, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” If every thought is captive to the Lord Jesus, that means that each concept we teach, and by extension each topic and subject, recognizes that Jesus is Lord—that this is His discipline, His classroom.

³NKJV. (The Holy Bible, New King James Version, Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.) Emphasis supplied.

these differentiating criteria to include that which is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and worthy of praise. He then counsels us to thoughtfully consider these values in making moral choices.⁴ Finally, Scripture highlights justice, mercy, and humility as foundational values and the divine expectation for our lives (Micah 6:8).

In essence, biblical values are God's desires for us as His creation. They are the portal to the abundant life that Christ wants us to experience (John 10:10). As a result, character formation—the development of a moral, value-based framework—is foremost in education. It is insufficient to simply convey knowledge, promote understanding, or impart skills and competencies. These are of value only when they operate within the context of a moral life, evidenced by ethical decisions and actions anchored in the character of God.

4. Teaching as a divine calling. In Ephesians 4, Paul states that when Christ ascended to heaven, He gave us special gifts, including the gift of serving as pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:8, 11). In the original language, it is clear that the gift of pastor and teacher is given to the same group of people. It represents a double portion of the Spirit (2 Kings 2:9), with important implications for both pastors and teachers.⁵ Paul adds that we are to see our role as God's ambassadors, "as though God were making his appeal through us,"⁶ while Peter writes that "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11).

Teaching then is not merely a job, a career, nor a profession. It is a vocation,⁷ a divine calling. As we respond to that call, we become God's endorsed representatives, with authority and responsibility.

5. A Spirit-filled life. It is essential that an educator receive God's Spirit. In His promise of the Counselor, for example, Christ indicated that it was the Holy Spirit who would teach us all things (John 14:26). Having received God's Spirit, we are also enabled to understand divine truth and to then teach, "expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."⁸ Paul further states that we "are an epistle of

⁴Philippians 4:8, NLT. (Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Wheaton, Illinois 60189. All rights reserved.)

⁵It suggests, for example, that pastors are to educate their flock, and not merely sermonize (Matthew 28:18-20). On the other hand, teachers are to also see their role as that of a shepherd, nurturing and caring for their flock (Jeremiah 13:20).

⁶2 Corinthians 5:20. Writing to Timothy, Paul clarifies that those who are called to teach are also to be faithful to their calling (2 Timothy 2:2).

⁷The word "vocation" is derived from the Latin "vocare" which means "to call."

⁸1 Corinthians 2:12-13, NIV84. (The Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973,

Christ,... written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets... of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3).

In the Christian view, to be spiritual is to be Spirit-filled. Consequently, a Christian educator must not only be competent, but also committed, for it is through the efficacy of the Holy Spirit that our students experience salvation. As educators, our greatest need is that the Spirit work in and through us.

In order to become authentic Christian teachers, our first and most important task is to develop a biblical view of our life and of our role as educators. This paradigm includes an understanding that all of life and learning is to take place within a spiritual framework, that all truth is God's truth, that character formation centers on divine values, that teaching is a divine calling, and that we are to live a Spirit-filled life.

The Challenge of Being

Being is not static, but dynamic. It is not cast in stone, but animate. It has to do more with how we live our lives, than with what we say we are. For a teacher, this matter of being includes at least three dimensions: how we approach our discipline, *how* we view our students, and how we model the Christian life. We will consider each of these.

A Christian educator approaches his or her discipline from a Christian worldview.

What does this mean? First of all, it suggests that we must make Scripture foundational. The rationale is that the Word of God speaks with relevance to each dimension of life, that every discipline should connect with our lives in meaningful ways, and that as a result, God's Word should be relevant to each academic discipline. Our task is to seek for a thoughtful understanding of Scripture in relation to the discipline as a whole, and by extension, to those topics that we teach.

Next, we must clarify and evaluate assumptions. Every discipline makes crucial underlying assumptions. These include the nature of the discipline and how it should be conducted, the origin and purpose of life, and the nature of truth and reality, as well as matters pertaining to our relationship with God, with other human beings, and with the world around us. Our task is to evaluate how these assumptions align with the biblical perspective.

Third, we will need to trace the great controversy. Every dimension of life is affected by the conflict between good and evil. In fact, the great

1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.)

controversy theme is the grand sense-making narrative for life.⁹ Our task is to understand how our respective disciplines are shaped by this cosmic conflict.

Fourth, we are to consider the gospel commission (Matthew 28:18-20). This means that we see our profession as a ministry. That we live a life of service. And that we view our witness not as an event, but as a lifestyle (see Figure 1). “You are my witnesses.” (Isaiah 44:8, emphasis supplied). Our task is to understand what the gospel commission imparts to our discipline in terms of witness and service.

Finally, we must link biblical values to life issues. Real-life issues, with ethical implications, exist in every discipline. When considering a controversial issue, we need to ask: What are the purposes God intended for this area of human activity? What biblical response is called for? Our task is to identify guiding principles and moral values.

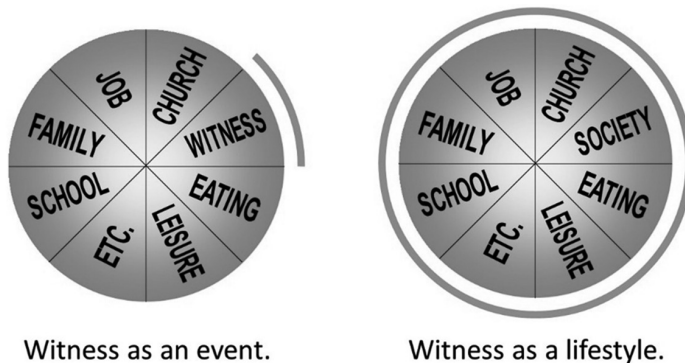


Figure 1. Two views of Christian witness.

A Christian educator views his or her students as God does.

What does this imply? The overarching theme is that God views every student as a candidate of heaven. He sees them, not as they are, but as they can become by His grace.

This divine perspective conveys a number of implications in regards to how we relate to students. It suggests that we take a personal interest in each student, and that we affirm the worth and potential of each individual. It means that we are to love our students, even though we may disagree with

⁹It helps us understand, for example, why bad things happen to good people. The book of Job, which speaks to this matter, takes us behind the scenes in the conflict.

them. It means that we trust them, even though at times they may seem untrustworthy.¹⁰ It implies that we challenge them to do their best and help them to develop a sense of mission. Above all, it reminds us that our ultimate purpose is to lead our students to experience a personal relationship with Christ.

A Christian educator models the Christian life

What does this include? It indicates that our lives are to reflect the character of Christ, that our students see an accurate and attractive picture of who God truly is. As a result, they can say, “If God is like my teacher, I want to know Him!” It involves that we convey confidence in God’s revelation and that we affirm biblical standards of moral behavior. It means that we make the Christian life an adventure, with zest!¹¹

The Challenge of Living

How should we function as Christian educators? How should we live? The aspect of action focuses on reaching out with intentionality to secular postmodern persons with salvation purpose - “In the highest sense the work of education and the work of redemption are one.” (White, 1903.p. 30)-. It involves a number of key behaviors (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Reaching the secular person

¹⁰How many times, for example, have we let God down, and yet, despite our untrustworthiness, God continues to give us opportunities and responsibilities?

¹¹Young people often conclude that the Christian life is all about what one *cannot* do; that anything happy or fun is swiftly prohibited. Jesus, however, declared, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, NKJV). Our students need to see the Christian life as the abundant life. The most powerful part of that message is how we ourselves approach the Christian life.

Create community. Contemporary secular society is post-individualist. Its postmodern focus emphasizes community. The following foundational works address the principal tenets of postmodernism, evidenced in contemporary culture (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991; Cahoone, 2003; Erickson, 2001; Foucault, 2001; Lyotard, 1984). Building community, including virtual communities, has become a prime goal of postmoderns. Scripture also affirms the role of community, both within the body of believers and in fulfilling the gospel commission (Psalm 133:1; Matthew 25:31-46; Acts 2:1, 46; Romans 15:1; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Galatians 6:2).

As Christian educators, we need to be proactive in creating caring, connected communities in our classrooms and throughout the school. We should be intentional in establishing positive relationships with and among students. We must remember that belonging precedes believing.

Recognize context. Postmoderns have high-lighted the significance of context and, by extension, culture (Iggers (2009), 122-128; Jameson (2003), 564-574; Rorty (2003), pp. 447-456. As Christians, we must also seek to understand others' background and culture, which modify the way they see and understand life. In Scripture, the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) illustrates the importance of understanding culture, and of taking context into account.

As a result, when discussing social issues, historical events, and biblical passages with postmoderns, it is essential that we examine context. This also helps us to avoid imposing our own conditions on interpretations of meaning and motive. At the same time, we cannot mindlessly accept or reject contemporary culture. We are to affirm those elements of culture that are in harmony with God's will, and we are to redirect any aspect that may not be congruent with God's character or His plan.¹²

Validate emotion. In the age of Reason, modernists tended to suppress feelings and elevate logic. In rejecting rationalism, postmodernism has chosen to highlight emotion (Zembylas, 2005). Thus the pervasiveness of comments such as these: "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" "Go with your gut feeling!" The result is the tendency of contemporary society to elevate feelings over rationality and objective truth.

In the Christian perspective, the emotions are of importance (Nehemiah 8:10; John 11:35). Too often, we have denigrated emotion into

¹²As Christians, we should see our role, not primarily as a thermometer—adapting to the prevailing context, but as a thermostat of context and culture—creating a positive difference for God in the world.

a sign of intellectual weakness, and have reduced the gospel to a sterile set of postulates and proof texts. As Christians, we must affirm feeling as well as reason. We should make the gospel not only logically compelling, but also emotionally attractive. While we should help others to think carefully and analytically about what they believe, we must also encourage sensitivity, spontaneity, and passion.

Respect diversity. Postmodern secularism celebrates diversity and promotes inclusiveness (Fallis, 2007; Foucault, 2001). It maintains that minority groups have rights and merit respect. It holds that the community must function as a support network for the individual members of society. This perspective resonates with the Christian worldview. Christ's mission was to break down barriers of exclusivity, to set the oppressed free (Isaiah 58:6; Luke 4:16-21). He reached out to the marginalized, to those rejected by mainstream society.¹³

As Christian educators, we must recognize that each individual, regardless of ability, ethnicity, or social status, is of inherent worth, both by creation and by redemption (Isaiah 43:1; Jeremiah 1:5; John 3:16). We are to become a voice for the exploited and oppressed. We are to treat each person with respect, irrespective of ethnic or religious affiliation. Furthermore, the Christian paradigm must be open to consideration of divergent views, while at the same time safeguarding fundamental beliefs (Isaiah 8:20). Our goal is unity in diversity.

Engage in dialogue. Secular postmoderns view learning as a democratic process, not merely as the transmission of knowledge from expert to novice (Edwards and Usher (1994); Giroux (2003), pp. 383-389; Hinchey, 2010; Slattery, 2013. It is more a conversation, in which both parties share experiences and insights. Our role as educators is consequently less of a top-down dispenser of information, and more that of a guide by the side. Increasingly, we should think of education as learning together, as forming a learning community.

There is an important corollary to this approach. We should make it clear that Christians do not have a monopoly on truth. Rather, non-believers also discover truth.¹⁴ The key difference is that the Christian recognizes the Source of that truth. This implies that we can all learn from each other, regardless of belief or background, provided that we can connect that knowledge back to its Source and apply it to our lives through the truth-filter of His Word.

¹³Matthew 11:19; Mark 2:16. The woman at the well of Sychar, for example, was marginalized from mainstream society due to a combination of ethnicity, gender, and lifestyle (John 4:5-42).

¹⁴God "causes his sun to shine on evil people and good people. He sends rain on those who do right and those who don't" (Matthew 5:45), because He desires all "to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

Build faith bridges. In the postmodern world, there is a new openness to spiritual themes. Spirituality is no longer banished to the fringes of society, but has become a social dialogue. This surge in spiritual consciousness, however, should not be confused with a renewed interest in religion. Postmoderns are spiritual, but not necessarily religious (Boeve, 2003; Dockery, 2001; Greer, 2003; Penner, 2013). Many, in fact, are suspicious or openly antagonistic toward religion. This poses a monumental challenge!

All of this suggests that Christians are to be ambassadors of generosity, benevolence, and goodwill. It implies that our witness may best be formulated as relational—developing conversations about God, sharing one’s personal experience with God, and seeking a deeper understanding of the Spirit. Finally, secular postmoderns must see that Christianity is a vibrant community of faith, experiencing the joy and peace of a Spirit-filled life.

Conclusion

As Christian educators living in a secular postmodern world, we are to think deeply and christianly regarding our beliefs and convictions. The challenge of becoming. We should then view our discipline and our students from God’s perspective, and exemplify the Christian life in a faithful and invitational way. The challenge of being. Finally, we must connect meaningfully with our students and converse clearly and persuasively regarding our Christian worldview. The challenge of acting, of living. Together, these three ingredients—becoming, being, and living—present us with the opportunity of serving faithfully and effectively as Christian educators in a secular society.

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